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ABSTRACT

Both linking agents and training consultants can help school systems solve some difficult problems: how to learn about current research and successful programs, and how to adapt and implement promisisng programs. After a successful initial experience obtaining technical assistance from the Network of Innovative Schools, Inc., the Chelsea Public Schools participated with them in a national consortium. Consortium activities focused on finding and adopting a successful innovative approach to teaching reading. In the spring of 1976 a network linking agent and a consortium steering committee assessed local needs and reviewed successful programs. After an extensive inderth study, the linking agent and the steering committee adopted the xemplary Center for Reading Instruction (ECRI) Program. The linking agent and committee planned an eight-day training and planning workshop to be conducted by a training consultant from the ECRI staff. Although the program is only partially implemented, initial informal evaluation suggests that the training and introduction phases of the program have been successful, and teachers express continuous enthusiasm. Much of this success is credited to the consortium linking agent and the ECRI training consultant. Their success is partially attributed to their nonthreatening relationship to school staff (because they are outsiders) and their total (rather than partial) commitment to the project. (JM)

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The Client: Working with Linking Agents to Find and Use Resources

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A problem which has confronted many public school administrators has been the difficulty of obtaining easy access to relevant research. Most small school systems have little or no funding available for research and development projects. The position of Director of Research and Evaluation is a luxury few can afford. The task of attempting to gain access to current research and developing cost effective educational programs is usually assigned to an individual or individuals already burdened with many other duties. Thus it is little wonder that in many school systems curriculum development tends to be a haphazard operation. This has resulted in school systems expending inordinate amounts of energy, "re-inventing the wheel". The drain that this places on the rather limited resources available to most public schools almost assures that the "re-invented wheel", will suffer by comparison with "wheels" already in production elsewhere.

One only has to review what has occurred in public education in the last 25 years to recognize the confusion that has resulted from school systems jumping from one "bandwagon" to another, in an attempt to be "innovative". The "Back-to-Basics" movement appears to be, at least in part, attributable to the public's disenchantment with many of the so-called "innovative programs" foisted upon their children which have not measurably resulted in the improvement of educational services being delivered. I do not mean to imply that all innovative programs have resulted in bad learning experiences for our school children. On the contrary many well conceived,

carefully developed innovative programs have been implemented and have resulted in improved learning experiences for the student participants. The problem is that dissemination of successful innovative programs has been, to say the least, sporadic.

It seems blatantly apparent that educational text book publishers have exerted considerable influence in the area of curriculum development. One need only review what has occurred during the last 2 decades, within many of the classrooms in our public schools relating to the teaching of reading, mathematics and science, in particular, to reach this conclusion. It is not my intention to place blame on the publishers for any of the confusion that exists in many of our schools today, relative to the development and implementation of more effective educational programs, but rather to simply state, that at the very least, they may have been a contributing factor.

Many other factors seem readily apparent also, but I do not intend to dwell on them here. It is sufficient to say that many school systems, for a variety of reasons, have been too ready to assimilate a text book series or packaged "program" into their system with too little understanding of the ramifications of those decisions.

These approaches to curriculum development, underscore the necessity to insure easy accessibility to current research and successful programs developed throughout the nation and to insure effective assistance in studying and adapting the programs for local implementation.

In Chelsea we recognized the need to develop more effective programs in a number of areas. We proceeded to explore ways in which to gather information that we knew must be available on programs that were identified as exemplary by various federal and state agencies charged with the responsibility of evaluating programs developed with federal and/or state funds.

This exploration led to involvement with the Massachusetts Diffusion Assistance Project, a project of The NETWORK of Innovative Schools, Inc. With their assistance we adopted with adaptations, a kindergarten screening program for the Title III ESEA Project, "Early Prevention of School Failure". The NETWORK staff worked diligently with members of our staff and provided us with the necessary technical assistance to successfully adopt the screening component of this project. Unfortunately funds were not available to expand on this initial effort thus assistance could not be maintained. But the necessary groundwork had been laid which resulted in the system being able to continue to utilize effectively, the screening component of the Title III project. It is anticipated that other components of the project will be adopted after modifications, in the future, even though funding for continued assistance from the Massachusetts Diffusion Assistance Project, will not be available.

Although assistance could not be maintained to assure successful implementation of all components of the Title III project, the success of the initial venture made the school system receptive to participating with The NETWORK in the National Consortium.

We enthusiastically supported participation for we recognized a strong need in the school system in general and the school selected to participate in particular, for the adoption of an innovative approach to teaching reading. We further recognized a need to assist teachers in their efforts to improve the reading and language skills of the student population by sharpening their teaching skills.

The scope and sequence of the project proposal seemed to assure that effective assistance would be available for a sufficient time frame to insure successful adoption and adaptation of a nationally validated exemplary program.

Consortium activities commenced during the spring of 1976 with the establishment of a Consortium Steering Committee at the local level and the appointment of Leslie Hergert as the NETWORK Linking Agent. Under her able leadership the committee assessed local needs, reviewed approximately 40 "successful" reading programs, narrowed this group down to approximately 6 programs. After an extensive in-depth study of the 6 programs, including on-site observations, consensus was reached to recommend adoption of the Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction (ECRI) program. Ten classroom teachers volunteered to participate in a pilot program.

The School Committee formally approved the proposal in June, 1977. The proposal approved by the committee outlined in detail, the

commitments, budgetary and other, that were part and parcel of approval. It detailed the tentative plans for an eight day training and planning workshop formulated by the Consortium Linking Agent and the Consortium Steering Committee, scheduled for August, 1977, once approval was granted.

Arrangements were completed for the workshop to be conducted by a training consultant from the ECRI staff in Utah. Materials necessary for the workshop and the implementation of the program in the fall were ordered. Prior to the workshop and commencement of the pilot program, an implementation plan, detailing the School's and The NETWORK's responsibilities was prepared and all parties signed the agreement.

The pilot program has been operational since the beginning of this school year and initial informal evaluation seems to indicate that the training and implementation phases have been successful. Students, teachers and administrators involved in the program express continuous enthusiasm.

Students appear to be progressing at a faster rate than in previous years and they appear to be more highly motivated. Much of the success evident at this point must be attributed to the dedication and commitment of the teacher volunteers and the support they have received from the Consortium Linking Agent and the ECRI Training Consultants. The roles played by the Linking Agent and the Training Consultants cannot be under-estimated when one examines the reasons for the successful adoption of the ECRI program.

It is apparent to me that a number of factors contribute to the success of their endeavors, for example: Their relationship to the school staff is less threatening as they have no formal ties to the administration or the school system. Within the project, their main responsibilities are to insure its successful implementation. Their involvement, especially the Linking Agent's, is a total involvement. She is totally committed to this one task rather than partly committed, with many other tasks also requiring her attention. Project participants are assured that their concerns will be addressed by her and that she has resources behind her to make certain that appropriate actions can occur whenever necessary.

I am convinced that this program could not have been successfully introduced without the outstanding leadership and assistance provided by the Linking Agent and the Training Consultants.

More remains to be done, but I am confident that with continued support the pilot program can be expanded and full implementation can occur.